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STATE FOR WHA/CEN ROIS BEAL

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PROP](#) [EAID](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [BH](#)

SUBJECT: CUBA'S MEDICAL DIPLOMACY IN BELIZE

¶1. Summary. Since 1999, Cuba has been sending doctors, nurses, and medical technicians to work free of charge in Belize. Ninety-two Belizean students currently study medicine in Havana on Cuban government scholarships. More than 1,500 patients have traveled from Belize to Cuba for free surgery. Medicine is the largest component of Cuba's public diplomacy here. The programs were recently extended through 2010 and have been used to promote Cuban political activism. End Summary.

Cuban doctors reside in rural Belize

¶2. This year (2007) marked the eighth anniversary of the Cuban Health Brigade in Belize. Since 1999, Cuba has been sending doctors, nurses, and medical technicians to work free of charge in rural areas of the country. The program claims to have saved more than 15,000 lives. (Comment: There is no way to verify this number. End comment.) Over an eight-year period more than 500 Cuban health professionals have participated. There are currently 115 Cuban doctors and health technicians rendering services in Belize. Of the 115 professionals, 63 are physicians (45 general practitioners and 18 specialists). The program also supplies nurses, engineers, x-ray technicians, and occupational therapists. Government officials recently signed an extension agreement that will continue the program through 2010.

Free medical trips and scholarships

¶3. The Cuban government also has a long standing program of providing scholarships to Belizeans to study in Cuba. There are currently 92 Belizean students studying medicine in Havana on Cuban government scholarships. Additionally, in 2005, the Cuban government, with funding provided by Venezuela, began a new program of flying patients to Havana for medical treatment. The free transportation, accommodation, and surgery have benefited more than 1,500 patients from Belize. The patients have primarily received eye surgery but other operations have also been conducted.

The Results

¶4. According to Belizean Health Minister Jose Coye, the initiatives have provided an invaluable service to Belize, by "picking up the slack" in Belize's health system - particularly in the rural areas. Although there have been complaints about ill-trained Cuban doctors, many ordinary Belizeans believe that the majority of the Cuban professionals demonstrate a higher level of capability and professionalism than their Belizean counterparts. Thus far most of the returning Belizean scholarship recipients have entered private practice in the urban areas, where the economic incentives are more lucrative. Additionally, many Belizean medical professionals have left Belize to work in the United States for more attractive wages. A small number of Cubans married locals, attained

residency, and opened private practices in Belize.

¶5. Cuban programs target neglected rural areas that receive relatively little attention. While the Cubans have attempted other programs like donating free light bulbs to all Belizeans, it is in the area of medical diplomacy that they have gained the most favorable press. Cuba has also used both the Cuban medical officials residing in Belize and Belizeans studying in Cuba to form groups to speak out on political issues such as "freedom for the Cuban five."

¶6. Comment. The effectiveness of Cuba's efforts highlights the importance of our medical and community outreach projects in Belize. USNS Comfort, military medical missions, medical visits of private groups and donations made by the Embassy are important parts of our public diplomacy efforts in the region. End Comment.

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